

CHAPTER XVIII

THE AUSTRALIAN NAVY, 1915-18

MOST of the division, in industry and politics, that hampered the war effort of Australians was due to the difficulty already referred to—which events of 1939-40 showed to be common to nations in similar conditions—the difficulty of realising that their fate hung on a struggle of which they saw so little. Only the German Navy, in that war, could have brought the war closer to Australians; and of the two German merchant cruisers, which, we now know, were ordered to do this by raiding Australian sea traffic, the *Prinz Eitel Friedrich*, unable to get coal, had made for the Atlantic and been interned in March 1915 at Newport News, and in December 1914 the *Cormoran* had been similarly interned at the United States coaling station at Guam.

No part of the devastation of war physically and directly affected Australia until, on 6th July 1917, the large freighter *Cumberland* was sunk by an unexplained explosion ten miles off Gabo Island. In consequence of the absence of nearly all Australian warships in the general war effort in other seas, the Admiralty had already arranged with Japan for two cruisers to be sent to Australia. These were then at Jervis Bay, and, on one of them visiting the wreck, the damage was at first thought to be due to internal explosion. The I.W.W. again was suspected, and not for two months were minesweepers sent to the area.

Then an enemy minefield was at once discovered. Two other steamers, the *Port Kembla* and *Wimmera*, had been sunk by mines off New Zealand. A well-known pas-

senger steamer, the *Matunga*, suddenly disappeared when about to reach New Guinea, on 6th August 1917. An intense search was carried out, largely by the cruiser *Encounter*, but no trace was found. In this case a German commerce raider, believed to be in the Pacific, was suspected; and on 15th January 1918 came secret news that a bottle had been found in the Celebes, thrown overboard by prisoners on the German raider *Wolf*. In the bottle was a message telling of her movements, mine-layings, victims—including the *Matunga*—and giving her description. The *Matunga* had been captured through her own wireless signals. The *Wolf*, with this and many other crews aboard, eventually reached Germany safely in February 1918. Not till after the Armistice was it found, by a German disclosure to the British Admiralty, that the *Wolf* had laid another minefield off Cape Everard in Victoria. The area was then swept and a few mines were found. The German story that the *Wolf's* seaplane flew over Sydney has been proved untrue.¹

One other German raider visited the Pacific in 1917, a much less powerful ship, the *Seeadler*, captained by Count Felix von Luckner. That adventurous character, who prided himself on being a descendant of one of Napoleon's marshals and a sportsman by nature, captured a number of prizes, mainly sailing ships, in the Atlantic and then came to the Pacific and was wrecked in the Society Islands. After escaping in a motor launch he was made prisoner in September 1917 in the Fiji Islands.

After the capture of New Guinea in 1914, and the transfer of the battle-cruiser *Australia* and the light cruisers *Sydney* and *Melbourne* to the Atlantic and eventually the North Sea, the Australian "little ships" were for about half of the war used as part of the net for foiling German plans of raising revolt in India. These plans had

¹ For the details see Vol. IX, pp. 342-58; also *The Amazing Cruise of the German Raider "Wolf"*, by Capt Donaldson, and *The Cruise of the "Wolf"*, by Roy Alexander

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been made before the war, an Indian revolutionary organisation, known as "Ghadr", having touch with the German General Staff in Berlin. German staffs or agents in Persia, Java and Siam were to engineer the uprisings and supply arms and literature. Early in the war these staffs became active; the agents in Persia were met by still more effective British agents and by organising land forces to bar their penetration. Those in Siam, Java and Malaysia were unable to move owing to the constant British naval patrol. Some of the principal German staffs organising this campaign were in America and Shanghai; but three ships that were to bring arms or other help—the American sailing ship *Annie Larsen*, the American steamer *Maverick*, and the schooner *Henry S.*, were eventually forced into Dutch or American ports where their cargo was seized.

Nevertheless seventy-four German ships were in ports of the Dutch Indies, and at any time attempts might be made to sneak some of them out through the British patrol and arm them. In mid-1915 Australia sent, first, the small cruiser *Psyche* and sloop *Fantome* (two old British warships lent to the R.A.N.) to patrol together with some British ships the Bay of Bengal. Almost immediately afterwards the commander-in-chief of the British China Squadron telegraphed to the Australian Naval Board that the Germans had a munitions base near Java, Timor or Celebes. He asked the Board to have Dilli visited, and to patrol Macassar Strait (eastward of Borneo) and the Aru Islands. Accordingly in October 1915 the three destroyers



Warrego, *Parramatta* and *Yarra* with the *Una* (the German government yacht *Komet*, captured in New Guinea²) began this patrol, working largely from Sandakan in Borneo. The larger cruiser, *Encounter*, after visiting Fanning and Christmas Islands, was sent there also, but early in 1916 was brought back to Australia, which was without naval protection, and the *Una* returned to New Guinea. But, under the C.-in-C. China Squadron, the three destroyers were sent early in 1916 to Bangkok and Saigon.

The Australian Naval Board now feared that the Germans might revert to the use of armed merchant raiders or minelayers. Four new ships built in Australia, the light cruiser *Brisbane* and destroyers *Huon*, *Swan* and *Torrens*, soon became available, and in August 1916 the new destroyers relieved the older ones, then working off the Philippines. Early in 1917 the older destroyers in their turn were about to relieve the newer ones when there came, first, an alarm as to a raider, and, in May, a request from the Admiralty (which, under the Australian offer of its fleet, had the right to send an order) that they be sent to counter the very grave submarine menace to Great Britain. They were at once refitted and sent to the Mediterranean, and were joined, at the Australian government's suggestion, by the three newer destroyers, refitted at Singapore. By August the six Australian destroyers were at Malta. Based there and at Brindisi until October 1918, they helped to carry out the blockade known as the "Otranto barrage", barring the exit from the Adriatic Sea against German and Austrian submarines.³

The *Fantome* and *Psyche* patrolled in Indian and

² The naval historian, Mr A. W. Jose, points out that she was renamed the *Una* evidently in commemoration of her being the first naval vessel captured by the R.A.N., but that the Latin for "first" is "*Prima*". *Una* means "the only one"—which, in fact, she was (*Vol. IX*, p. 121).

³ The full story is told in *Vol. IX*, pp. 310-27 (*Black Sea*, pp. 328-30).

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Malayan waters for more than two years—a trying task, in very great heat. The entry of America into the war made possible their return to Australia in September 1917. Both badly needed refitting; their speed was very low. On the *Psyche's* way home she passed through the Karimata Strait between Sumatra and Borneo on the very night on which the German raider *Wolf* (much more heavily armed) passed through it in the opposite direction. The *Wolf* sighted a two-funnelled “English” cruiser against the gleaming moonlit water, and her gun and torpedo crews were ready at their positions and itching to fire, but were not allowed to do so, the raider’s policy being to hide.⁴ The *Psyche* saw nothing and her log places her slightly too far south for this encounter—but no other British cruiser was anywhere near.

The *Brisbane*, after being sent to Malta, and then searching the Indian Ocean for a raider, was returned by the Admiralty in June 1917 owing to the Australian Naval Board’s fears of a raider. As has been seen two raiders did visit the south-west Pacific in the next few months. The destroyers had then been sent away, but the Admiralty had obtained two Japanese cruisers, and later obtained for a time the help of others. The *Psyche*, and, at times, *Encounter* were in Australian waters. The *Una* and the French cruiser *Kersaint* carried out a punitive expedition on Malekula in the New Hebrides in October, 1916, and the *Fantome* and a French party another in October, 1918.

But the main service of the Australian ships in that war was in the North Sea with the British Grand Fleet. From early 1915 the battle-cruiser *Australia*, and from the second half of 1916 the light cruisers *Sydney* and *Melbourne*, took their full share of the work and enterprises of the fleet. By an unlucky collision with the *New Zealand* (a British battle-cruiser, the gift of that Dominion)

⁴ See Vol. IX, pp. 349-50.

the *Australia* missed the Battle of Jutland, and the only action of Australian ships with the enemy in those waters—except against submarines—was a fight on 4th May 1917 between the *Sydney* and a German airship, the *L43*, which tried to bomb her—apparently neither side received damage. In the last part of the war the ships were often employed covering the vital Scandinavian convoys. Both the *Sydney* and the *Melbourne* were at that stage fitted with launching platforms for aeroplanes, and on 1st June 1918 both their aeroplanes went into action against two German machines which tried to bomb the 1st Battle Cruiser Squadron.⁵

The first two batches of cadets from the naval college at Jervis Bay served with the Grand Fleet in 1917 and 1918.⁶ Selected Australians represented their Navy in the famous raid on Zeebrugge. The *Australia*, as flagship of the 2nd Battle Cruiser Squadron led the port line of the British fleet escorting the surrendered German High Sea Fleet on 23rd November 1918. On 24th November 1924 she was voluntarily sunk outside Sydney Heads in accordance with the Washington agreement for the limitation of naval forces.

⁵ For the fight with *L43* see *Vol. IX*, pp 294-6. The *Sydney* (Captain J. S. Dumaresq) and *Dublin* and four destroyers were at the time engaging two submarines. For the action with aeroplanes see *Vol. IX*, pp 304-6. For the fine summary of the Australian Navy's services, by its historian, Arthur W. Jose, see *Vol. IX*, pp. 334-5.

⁶ For the outstanding successes of these and subsequent batches in the British naval schools—and of Australian soldiers at British army schools—see *Vol. VI*, p. 23 (*text*, and *footnote 25*). High among the first batch were J. A. Collins and F. E. Getting—both to be distinguished in the 2nd World War.